

Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America

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Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America, by Evan Carton. New York: Free Press, 2006. xi, 387 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$30.00 cloth.

Reviewer Galin Berrier is adjunct instructor in history at Des Moines Area Community College. He is the author of the chapter, "The Underground Railroad in Iowa," in *Outside In: African American History in Iowa, 1838–2000* (2001).

Evan Carton justifies his addition to the growing bookshelf of John Brown studies by observing that, although Brown's place in American history has been reassessed in several biographies published since the 1970s, "Brown remains somewhat abstract and alien" (x). To bring Brown and his contemporaries to life, Carton has assiduously mined the existing archival collections of letters, most notably the Oswald Garrison Villard collection of John Brown materials at Columbia University. He has also utilized the efforts of others, from contemporary admirers, such as Franklin Sanborn and Richard Hinton, through Villard's great biography of 1910, to more recent works by Stephen B. Oates and Louis A. DeCaro Jr.

Carton insists that his book "is a work of nonfiction," but he acknowledges that, when there are gaps in the archival record, "I sometimes visualize the undescribed sensory and emotional particulars and imagine the unpreserved words, thoughts, and motives which animated them" (x). The result is a thoroughly researched biography that reads like a novel.

One recent biography Carton did not utilize, since it appeared while he was completing his manuscript, is David Reynolds's *John Brown, Abolitionist* (2005), but their views of John Brown are remarkably similar. Like Reynolds, Carton is struck by John Brown's ability, almost alone among his contemporaries, "to free himself of . . . white supremacism" and "develop personal relationships with black people that were sustained, intimate, trusting, and egalitarian" (93). Both regard the murder of five proslavery settlers on Pottawatomie Creek in Kansas as significant not as a terrorist act but rather for demolishing the "psychological constraint and regional stereotype" that held that Yankees, unlike southerners, lacked the will to take violent action for their cause (203).

Until as late as the 1970s, American historians were inclined to dismiss John Brown as a deranged fanatic or madman. Carton repeats Mary Brown's wry comment to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that, "if her husband was insane . . . he had been consistent in his insanity since the moment she met him" (326). Carton observes that "had Brown been an escaped slave or a free northern black who acted and spoke exactly as the historical John Brown did, professional historians

of the last fifty years would not have labeled him mad" (342). "A man who lived, went to war, and died to help win black people's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness must have been black [as many Americans assume Brown to have been]. A white man who did these things must have been deranged or fanatical" (343).

One quality that sets Carton's biography apart is the clarity with which he traces the travels of John Brown and his contemporaries. The reader interested in following Brown's travels in Iowa, for instance, will find Brown first writing to his wife from his "tent about twenty miles west of the Mississippi" on September 4, 1855 (although Carton does not tell us that this location is in Scott County, Iowa) on his way to Kansas (139). Brown was in Iowa again in the summer and fall of 1856, convalescing at Tabor from injuries received in the fighting in "Bleeding Kansas" (217, 238-39). Carton bases his description of John Brown's fourth Iowa visit, when he and his men lodged for a time at Springdale in the winter of 1857-58, on Irving B. Richman, *John Brown among the Quakers, and other Sketches* (1894), and he also cites Louis T. Jones, *The Quakers of Iowa* (1914). One Iowa source he has not consulted, however, is John Todd's *Early Settlement and Growth of Western Iowa or Reminiscences* (1906), which may explain why he incorrectly refers to the Congregationalist colony of Tabor as a Quaker community (219, 225). In his description of John Brown's final trek across Iowa, in the winter of 1858-59, with 12 slaves forcibly freed from servitude in the Osage district of western Missouri, Carton refers to "the three thousand dollar reward that the governor of Missouri had offered for Brown's apprehension" (273). This oft-repeated claim appeared in James Redpath's *The Public Life of John Brown* (1860). But as F. C. Shoemaker has shown, in "John Brown's Missouri Raid," *Missouri Historical Review* (October 1931), although a bill to offer such a reward was debated in the Missouri House of Representatives in January 1859, it was never passed (82).

Evan Carton's highly readable and sometimes provocative biography of John Brown, while suffering as do other Brown biographies from an inadequate grasp of Iowa history, is a valuable contribution to the perhaps unending debate over the character and meaning of one of the most controversial figures in American history. It deserves a place beside the fine John Brown biographies by Stephen B. Oates and Oswald Garrison Villard.